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Dianne Reeves: Deep and Sprawling Roots

By Mike Joyce

SINGER Dianne Reeves is living proof you can go home again. Her career has come full circle with the release of her new album, "Quiet After the Storm," an acoustic album which reaffirms the remarkable jazz talent trumpeter Clark Terry saw in her when she was just 17 years old. And she's returned to Denver, where she grew up and where she's still surrounded by friends and family.

"I realized I didn't need to be in Los Angeles all the time," says Reeves, calling from Colorado. "All I needed was a good airport, so they built me a new one."

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It was the best move she ever made, she adds. "I feel more centered now, more grounded."

Performing a rare club engagement at Blues Alley Friday through Sunday, Reeves says she not only found it comforting to be back home but inspirational as well. In fact, one of the pieces she composed for the new album, a song called "Nine," derives from some of her fondest childhood memories. "Nine" is a very special song—my favorite on the whole album, because when I moved back here and started walking the streets I came up on, I remembered there was so much emphasis on using your imagination. That was back when your parents put you in the backyard with a couple of friends and within moments you could create an entire world and live in it for hours. It was such special time, one of the most sacred times, because you got to use your imagination. I think sometimes now, in this age of information, kids are told what to imagine. There isn't that freedom anymore."

In some ways "Nine" recalls the inspirational pop Reeves conjured on her big 1987

hit "Better Days," but most of the new album finds her in an acoustic jazz setting, paying homage to Billie Holiday and Cannonball Adderley, or occasionally demonstrating her fondness and affinity for exotic rhythms and textures.

The idea of cutting a jazz album wasn't entirely hers, Reeves says. She credits her cousin, the prolific keyboardist and producer George Duke, for encouraging her to take the gamble. After the pair collaborated on a jazz arrangement for Duke's last album, Duke was so pleased with the results he wanted to do more. "And that's what I wanted to do anyway," Reeves recalls.

Once they got to the studio, Reeves's band was augmented by several other musicians, including jazz pianist Jacky Terrasson, trumpeter Roy Hargrove, saxophonist Joshua Redman, flutist Hubert Laws, guitarists Kevin Eubanks and Dori Caymani, percussionist Airto Moreira and drummer Teri Lynne Carrington.

"We just got together and found a musical place that was really comfortable for us. The first thing we wanted to do was an acoustic record with an emphasis on jazz. There are expansions of my other concepts—a slight mixture of things—but it's really the jazz record we had in mind."

As the recording sessions unfolded, a few surprises developed, such as a sampled appearance by the late saxophonist Cannonball Adderley. As one of Adderley's former sidemen, Duke was only too happy to help Reeves salute the saxophonist with fresh arrangements of "Jive Samba" and "The Benediction (Country Preacher)".

"I wanted to write lyrics to an instrumental and we both loved Cannonball's music and the way people always responded to him," Reeves recalls. I wanted to create the kind of imagery his music evoked. So we started and it just kept getting bigger and bigger. When the label heard 'Country Preacher,'

they thought it would be great if Cannonball was on it, and George loved the idea so it all came together wonderfully."

Reeves says she's never more comfortable in the studio than when Duke is overseeing things. "George only works with people he really respects and then he gives you total artistic control. He doesn't produce every artist the same way. . . . For me, the relationship is great because you can be very vulnerable in the studio; you have to have complete trust. When I work with him I feel like I'm with my closest and dearest friend."

Reeves has had several other mentors who've helped her chart a venturesome path through pop, jazz and world beat. She still believes her early association with Clark Terry, who nurtured her love for jazz, "was probably the most important thing that ever happened to me. I was suddenly surrounded by great musicians, I knew what that felt like really early on."

She also credits her early tours with Harry Belafonte and Sergio Mendes for opening her ears to music from around the world and helping to shape her unusually broad repertoire. "Those experiences were very exciting to me," she says. "There was something in all of this music that I could relate to. There was something that I heard that had a part of me in it."

Despite the problems of marketing artists as versatile as she, Reeves says she has no intentions of tightening her musical focus for good. "There was a time when music was just music, before it became such a huge industry. The best thing for me is to be on a jazz label because that means I have freedom of expression. I like to think of music as having no boundaries. I think one of these days maybe it will be a very hip thing to do all kinds of music—it's beginning to happen."

DIANNE REEVES — Appearing Friday through Sunday at Blues Alley. ♦ To hear a free Sound Bite from this album, call 202/334-9000 and press 8101.



BY LESLIE FEINGOLD

Dianne Reeves: returning to jazz on her new George Duke-produced album.